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Kids:

A Representation in Film of the Social Forces Impacting Adolescents

BY CAROLYN SHEMWELL

Introduction

During development, children are not psychologically immune to what is occurring in their surroundings. Although children possess inherent qualities that determine their behaviors and attitudes to a large degree, they are also influenced and altered by life experiences and personal interactions with others. Research has shown that the psychological development of adolescents is affected when "stressful events" of an interpersonal nature occur (Compas and Wagner 74). Examples of stressors in the lives of children and their effects are illustrated in the 1995 movie *Kids*, directed by Larry Clark. This film provides a graphic, and often disturbing, depiction of the lives of adolescents living in an urban environment. The social challenges for youth are shown in the characters in the film, who daily face a low socioeconomic status, substance abuse, violence, poor parental interactions, harmful advertising, and peer pressures. These social forces have the potential to (and often do) negatively impact the psychosocial development of adolescents, and this is shown in the manner in which they react to their environment and behave throughout the movie.

Environment and Socioeconomic Status

The setting of the film *Kids* reflects the findings of research conducted at the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century which found that high rates of crime and delinquency are found in areas plagued with social problems such as single parent families, unemployment, multiple family dwellings, welfare, and low levels of education (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 81). Further studies developed a concentric zone model of city life, which divided cities into zoned regions of a central business district, surrounded by a zone in transition, surrounded by the zone of workman's homes, and a residential zone surrounded by an outlying commuter zone. The research determined that the highest rates of delinquency were within the three most central areas (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 82). The physical environment shown in the film depicts a locale resembling the central business zone, a zone in transition, and the zone of workman's homes. As the film unfolds, the viewer witnesses how the

psychosocial development of the characters in the film has been influenced by the social difficulties they encounter in their daily lives. A variety of scenes in the film indicate that these adolescents are living in or near the center of a depressed urban, rather than a wealthy suburban, area. For example, Darcy is shown leaning out of the window of a multiple story brick apartment building, Telly lives in a dilapidated apartment, and the wild party at the conclusion of the movie occurs in a city apartment. The adolescents are also shown walking down busy sidewalks with traffic racing by only feet away, and they trespass in a swimming pool with a sterile, urban appearance. Had the movie been set in a more residential area, the teenage characters may have been less likely to encounter negative social forces.

Socioeconomic status is another factor that contributes to and affects adolescents' development. As shown, a family's socioeconomic status determines in what area of town they are able to live, which therefore influences the types of experiences the child will have and the peers with whom they will interact. Areas in which many individuals of a lower socioeconomic class live (such as the zones of transition described previously) often tend to exhibit *anomie*, which is "the breakdown in moral ties, rules, customs, laws and the like that occurs in the wake of social change" (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 83). An environment filled with anomie, or "normlessness," leaves "individuals vulnerable or susceptible to delinquent behavior" (Lawrence 46). Therefore, adolescents living in an area demonstrating these qualities may be inclined to turn to delinquency in order to survive and be accepted.

Many of the characters in the movie reflected the strain of class-based theories of Albert Cohen, who outlined a system in which individuals behaved in a deviant manner in reaction to being unable to attain middle class values (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 84). According to his theory, adolescents are frustrated because their disadvantaged background does not allow them to achieve middle class ideals. Adolescents may then adopt a "college boy" mentality, and strive to succeed, or may retreat and become a "corner boy" who attempts to create a counter culture and adopts a reaction formation to reject (and in some cases, destroy) a mainstream lifestyle (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 84). The characters in *Kids* have developed the beginnings of a contra-culture, with a loose lifestyle and social support system. At no point are they shown attempting to assimilate into the surrounding environment. In most instances, they are lingering on the outside edge of a conventional lifestyle (such as when they loiter in the park), and when they do interact with society, it is only to behave in a violent fashion, such as a physical attack or robbery of a store. Therefore, although the presence of a class system cannot be avoided, it contributes to the psychosocial development of adolescents and how they react and interact with others.

Some researchers have speculated that there is a possible relationship between poverty and substance abuse. If this is the case, then this could affect adolescents' psychosocial behavior. One study found that "high alcohol availability geographic areas were associated with geographic areas characterized by lower incomes" (Smyth and Kort 76). Individuals living in these areas have greater exposure to substances, and

may, therefore, use substances to cope (Smyth and Kort 76). Youth living in lower income areas would be affected by such an environment, for more venues to illegally purchase alcohol would exist. Substance abuse was also found to increase in adults when they experienced frequent job changes and/or residential moves (Smyth and Kort 75). Adolescents would most likely be experiencing similar sentiments of depression and confusion and may seek alcohol to alleviate their despair. The characters in *Kids* frequently consume alcohol in their social interactions and even go so far as to steal it from a convenience store. Perhaps after viewing the adults in their environment, they felt drinking was an accepted way to deal with challenges and difficulties.

Substance Abuse

Throughout the movie, the characters consume alcohol (although all are well below the legal drinking age of 21), smoke cigarettes, and experiment with drugs as though these were perfectly respectable activities for someone of their age. Much research has been conducted to determine the effects of adolescent drinking and what causes teens and preteens to use substances. In some instances, teens turn to smoking, alcohol, and drugs as a way to self-medicate for depression and the stresses they encounter² (Hechinger 110). Adolescents often feel trapped between living as a child and living as an adult and may use substances in an attempt to appear older and be accepted into the world of the "grown-ups." Society sends confusing messages to teens; while one billboard may instruct about the dangers of substance use, the next two may feature advertisements for Joe Cool and Camel cigarettes or attractive young adults cheerfully engaged in an exciting pastime while consuming a beer. The average teenager may see as many as 2500 advertisements for alcohol per year (Hechinger 120). According to Hechinger, "most of the cultural messages aimed at young people stress the lures of instant pleasure" (111). One psychiatrist observes that 70 years ago, it was common for adolescents to take their first drink at the age of 17, and now this number has fallen to 13 (Hechinger 115). This wide range of ages is portrayed in the film *Kids*, where younger adolescents socialize with older adolescents and engage in risky behavior such as smoking and drinking. Additionally, studies have found that adolescents are not well educated about the alcohol content in certain drinks and the effects of over-consumption. Teenagers may also be confused because they see their parents and other adults consuming alcohol and feel, therefore, that they too should be able to drink as their parents do (Hechinger 110). The teens in the film exhibit characteristics of troubled youth, in that they have low self-esteem and a functional deficit in the decision-making process. Therefore, in an attempt to be socially accepted and raise their self-esteem, teens may make the poor decision to drink and drink irresponsibly when they do.

Violence

At one point in the movie, a group of loitering adolescents exhibit violent behavior when they brutally attack a man in the park. There are numerous elements that

could potentially influence the psychosocial development of these deviant youths and result in violent tendencies. Research has shown that individuals prone to violence may be hyperactive and exhibit aggressive behavior (Hawkins et al. 2). Telly, who instigates the physical conflict, exhibits an aggressive nature and also demonstrates some hyperactive qualities (his rapid style of speech, his quick movements, etc.). In the scene where Telly and Casper cause a disturbance in a neighborhood market in order to steal alcohol, they demonstrate the fact that many adolescents who behave violently may be inclined to participate in other criminal acts (such as robbery) (Chaiken 5). External factors such as parental criminality, child maltreatment, delinquent siblings, poverty, and community disorganization can also affect an individual's psyche and cause one to behave violently (Hawkins et al. 3). If parents express an attitude that does not denounce violence, it is more likely that children will come to see violence as acceptable (Hawkins et al. 4). As mentioned previously, these adolescents did not live in an affluent suburb; the poverty by which they were surrounded could have created the strain that led to violent behavior. A connection has also been found between seriously delinquent males and their alcohol and drug use – males who committed crimes such as robbery, assault, and drug dealing were more likely to use drugs and alcohol (Chaiken 6). Therefore, the social factors that contribute to psychosocial development in adolescents are interrelated and do not operate independently of one another.

Lack of Parental Involvement

As the film progresses, and the activities of the characters become more and more outrageous, it becomes evident that there is minimal parental involvement in their lives. Throughout the entire film, only one parent is seen, Telly's mother. The family's apartment is worn and unkempt, and the mother is breast-feeding a baby while smoking a cigarette. This behavior indicates that the mother is neglecting her child's best interests (by smoking) and at the same time neglecting Telly by ignoring his actions. Nothing is known of the parents of the other characters in the film, but it is possible that the delinquent and inappropriate behaviors of the adolescents could be caused by child abuse. Research has shown that "abused children exhibit high degrees of antisocial and delinquent behavior in adolescence" (Bavolek 2). It appears that many of the children in the film are neglected by their parents in the sense that they are able to roam the city freely and do not need to report their location. If children are not provided with a nurturing environment, they may have low self-esteem, a common characteristic of troubled youth (Bavolek 3). For example, after Jenny discovers that she has tested positive for the HIV virus, she attempts to call home from a pay phone to speak with her mother, but her mother is unavailable. Perhaps this was a recurring situation in Jenny's life, which could then contribute to her insecurities and partying lifestyle. Research has also shown that the "daughters of mothers who show little affection but set strict limits are more likely to engage in early sex" (Hechinger 92). This is an example of rebellion, and adolescents may be sexually

active at an earlier age than they intended in order to gain attention from their parents. Poor parenting also impacts adolescents' psychosocial development because it has been proven that individuals tend to mimic the parenting patterns they observed as children (Bavolek 2). The lack of adult presence contributes to the careless attitude conveyed by the characters in the movie.

Influence of Advertising

It is common for adolescents to be insecure about their physical appearance. Many times, doubts about their appearance (especially related to how they compare to other adolescents) result from images that appear in advertising. Boys are faced with images of well-toned males in underwear advertisements and even incredibly (and unrealistically) fit action figures (Hall 34). Females are portrayed unrealistically and tend to be objectified in advertising. According to Dr. Jean Kilbourne, this objectification is apparent when one aspect of the body is highlighted in an advertisement – the entire person is not considered, just a beautiful aspect of her physical appearance. Females in advertising also have a flawless appearance, often achieved by airbrushing and computer modification. Nonetheless, the advertisements appear to suggest that women should strive to appear as perfect as possible (Kilbourne). This social message can be very confusing for adolescents who may not have yet mastered a balance between what is reality and what is unattainable. Dr. Kilbourne also states that objectification may contribute to increased violence against women, as they are portrayed as “things” which are more easily abused than people. Although the movie *Kids* does not show domestic violence acts against women, there are indications that the adolescents do not respect one another and do not shy from using demeaning comments when discussing one another's physical attributes. This is seen in the swimming pool, where the boys and girls critique and discuss their appearances as though they were objects and not connected to a person. Telly also demeans women by the way in which he discusses his sexual conquests and uses foul language to describe the acts and the females. When Casper rapes Jenny near the end of the movie, there is an incredibly inhuman quality about the scene. Jenny is unconscious and appears to be a lifeless doll rather than a person. In Casper's drunken state, he is more likely to view Jenny as a “thing” he can use and does not consider the consequences of his actions. The casual and free approach used in the movie to comment frankly and inappropriately on an individual's appearance is not healthy for an adolescent's fragile self-esteem, and advertisements that imply that physical appearances are essential for acceptance are not a positive influence on the minds of teenagers.

Peer Relations

Another social force that strongly impacts the psychosocial development of adolescents is the influence of peers. This is evident in the movie, for there are two clearly distinguishable groups: the older adolescents, who are the leaders, and the younger adolescents, who observe the activities of the wild bunch. This exemplifies

multiple aspects of Sutherland and Cressey's Theory of Criminal Behavior. Sutherland and Cressey state that "criminal behavior is learned" and "in interaction with other persons in a process of communication," (which may also include gestures), and "the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups"(184). The younger adolescents, who are already smokers, may begin to engage in criminal and violent activities after observing the behavior of their older "role models." This is also in keeping with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which states that individuals with low self-esteem (as these adolescents exhibit) observe others of a similar age and status and then adopt their behaviors if there are not numerous negative consequences. Another aspect of peer influence is seen in lower socioeconomic classes where young males learn the "male role" from their peers because of the lack of a father figure in their lives (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 85). This may potentially result in an exaggerated male persona (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 85), such as what is demonstrated by Telly, who attempts to be masculine by beginning altercations and bragging of his sexual conquest to friends. According to Erickson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, between the ages of 11 and 18, the most important relationships are with peers. Therefore, it is not abnormal that adolescents would want to observe and mimic the behavior of their friends in an attempt to be accepted. At this age, individuals are attempting to establish an identity that is separate from that of their parents, and adolescents tend to adopt the behavior of those in their peer group. This idea is supported by the scenes in *Kids* where the characters, broken into their respective gender groups, have extended discussions about their sexual activity, and it is revealed that many had similar opinions and experiences. This portrayal supports findings that: "Virgins are likely to be friends with other virgins, but if one member of the circle becomes sexually active, the others may either break the ties of friendship or follow the 'sophisticated example'" (Hechinger 91). In this case, all of the friends appear to have similar sexual experiences. Research has shown that "females may be more dependent upon others for development of personal identity" (Compas and Wagner 72). Perhaps this is why Telly is able to persuade multiple adolescent females to sleep with him – having sexual intercourse provided validation for the girls' fragile self-esteems and would provide them with a stronger idea of their individual personalities.

Sexual Behavior

The sexual behavior of the adolescents in *Kids* provides further evidence of the social forces that influence the psychosocial development of adolescents. Statistics show that more and more adolescents are sexually active³, and at a younger age. At the same time, the number of adolescents with STDs is also increasing (a situation faced by the character Jenny). This continues to be a problem among teens because they are uneducated about the risks of unprotected sex and do not know where to go for help when the need does arise. It is interesting to note that, according to a survey by the American Health Association, over 70 percent of adolescents do not receive

care for their disease because they do not want friends to know of their condition. However, the number of adolescents who say they do not seek treatment because they do not want their parents to be aware of the situation is slightly less than 60 percent (Hechinger 75). This reflects the tendency of adolescents to place more value on the opinions of their peers rather than their parents. Additionally, peer influences may encourage adolescents to engage in sexual activity if they feel that their friends are sexually active. Reputation within a peer group can also influence how adolescents handle sexual relations; a teenager may feel shy about asking their partner about protection, because it would imply a lack of trust and promiscuity (Hechinger 98). A casual approach to sex is shown in the film by the character Telly, who engages in sexual intercourse with multiple partners in one day. He is also a carrier of the HIV virus but most likely does not receive care out of ignorance of his situation.

Conclusion

The film *Kids* gives "a day in the life of" perspective of the difficulties encountered by urban dwelling teenagers on a daily basis. It would be extremely interesting to have a case study background of Telly, Jenny, Casper, and Darcy to assess and compare how their past experiences have shaped their behavior to this point and to investigate what factors are the most influential in the psychosocial development of adolescents. Research reports have found that many teenagers engage in risky behavior because they are unaware of the risks and consequences involved in doing so. In writing, the solution to this problem is not difficult - better education about substance abuse, practicing safe sex, and violence prevention would hopefully reduce adolescents' tendency to engage in dangerous behavior. In turn, it could be anticipated that the psychosocial development of adolescents would be affected because of newly acquired understandings about safe practices. Without a doubt, all of the social forces have interrelated causes, and if one cause could be properly avoided, it is likely that others would be as well. *Kids* is an extremely shocking depiction of the lives of disadvantaged adolescents in an urban environment, but the exaggerated and extended portrayal of these teenagers is an excellent artistic effort to illustrate and draw attention to the dilemmas faced by a portion of the population of American youth.

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- ¹ According to the authors of the study, a stressful event "was considered interpersonal in nature if either another person was involved in the stressful encounter, or if the event occurred in the life of another person in the individual's social network" (Compas and Wagner 79). Stressful events may include trouble with family, peers, teachers, etc.
- ² In a survey of adolescents, 41 percent claimed that they drink when bothered by something (Hechinger 115).
- ³ "One fourth of fifteen year old girls, and one third of fifteen year old boys have had sexual intercourse" (Hechinger 72)